

Advancing the Junior Youth Program (III)—Sites for the Dissemination of Learning

During the previous Five Year Plan, the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre followed the progress of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program through a network of resource persons who assisted in the promotion and development of this endeavor in a number of clusters in their regions. By 2008, a selected number of resource persons were focusing their efforts on enhancing the scheme of coordination in clusters that had made significant advances in the implementation of the junior youth program. A number of these clusters have gradually emerged as sites for the dissemination of learning and are now providing training to coordinators and potential coordinators. While developing the capacity in these clusters to expand the program and sustain a sizable number of groups over three years, the resource persons have also offered regular training to an increasing number of coordinators and begun to systematize a learning process that has established the junior youth program on a firmer foundation throughout the world.

In acknowledging “the accumulating body of knowledge and experience” that had “given rise to the capacity in several clusters scattered across the globe to each sustain over one thousand junior youth in the program,” the Universal House of Justice, in its *Riḍván* 2010 letter, called for an expansion in the network of learning sites to ensure that capacity would increase in clusters to multiply the number of groups systematically. With some 40 sites for the dissemination of learning now in operation, serving about 400 advanced clusters, these structures are playing a critical role in the advancement of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program worldwide. In addition to providing orientation and training, the resource persons, through seminars and their visits with coordinators at regional and cluster levels, are able to transfer the lessons being generated globally through the Office of Social and Economic Development.

The previous two editions of this newsletter shared the firsthand experience of friends learning to implement different elements of the junior youth program with greater effectiveness. The accounts in this issue, drawn mainly from reports of resource persons, highlight the role of the learning sites in systematizing that experience and building capacity in coordinators for expanding and sustaining the program.

A Learning Site Generates Learning along Many Dimensions: Drawing on the experience gained at the site itself and from the clusters in its network, the learning site generates knowledge and then disseminates it. This account from the site in Ghana provides an overview of the elements of the junior youth program that have been the focus of its learning.

Ghana

The **Accra-Tema** cluster is a learning site in Africa that supports a network of 13 clusters, not only in Ghana but also in the Gambia, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. The report that

follows shares stories highlighting areas of learning about the junior youth program that the site disseminates through its seminars and through collaboration with training institutes.

- *The junior youth program can enkindle a lifelong commitment to service.*

Youth who have recently completed the junior youth program have increasingly shown a desire to serve. In Ghana, most youth find it more desirable to attend boarding schools at the senior secondary school level, as it is a tradition. The boarding system, however, often prevents them from organizing core activities. For a number of youth who participated in the junior youth program, service has remained an indispensable component of their lives. As a result, an increasing number of them have chosen to attend day schools instead of boarding schools, so that they can continue to serve as animators and children's class teachers in their clusters.

- *When the program is explained well, it is not difficult to attract individuals from the wider society.*

In the **Kabonde** cluster (**Sierra Leone**), while looking for individuals who might be interested in serving as animators, the coordinator of the cluster encountered a young shopkeeper and had a conversation with him. Meeting this young man in his shop, the coordinator shared with him the program's potential to effect both individual and societal transformation. The coordinator later paid this young man regular visits in which he shared with him additional themes related to the program. Inspired by this vision, the youth played a pivotal role in assisting the coordinator to identify additional individuals to participate in the animator training. The time and venue for the training was set, but unfortunately the funds did not arrive on time. Undeterred by this, the coordinator presented the situation to the participants and suggested that individuals try to offer anything within their means. This young man volunteered to cover the cost of meals for two days so the training could begin.

The training included 18 friends from the wider society. As the training progressed, the participants sought to learn more about the Faith, which led the coordinator to share with them his knowledge and personal experience. Realizing that this program was inspired by the Bahá'í Faith as its contribution to build a better world, the participants drew closer to the Faith and, as a result, four friends, including the young man, embraced it.

- *The junior youth program contributes to the natural development of the Bahá'í community.*

In the **Unity** cluster (**Nigeria**), training was organized for 17 friends interested in serving as animators. Twelve of these friends were from the wider society. Upon reaching the 18th and 19th sections of unit 2, the participants reflected on the story of Rúḥu'lláh, and the Bahá'í friends shared stories from the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the early believers. Learning that these early heroes of the Faith were youth like themselves and inspired by their qualities and the exemplary life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the friends from the wider society inquired about the history of the Faith. The coordinator took the opportunity to present the history of the Faith to the participants, which established a more intimate relationship between them and the Faith. At the end of the training, three friends embraced the Faith and became some of the most vibrant animators, and 14 new groups were formed.

- *When parents understand the program, they support it with all their energy.*

In the **Calabar** cluster (**Nigeria**), upon recognizing and appreciating the impact of the program, a pastor has been very supportive. It all started when his daughter decided to become an animator. As part of an institute campaign in Calabar, the friends approached members of a theater group to explain the program to them. Among the members of this group was the daughter of the pastor. During the presentation, she expressed great enthusiasm and went on to participate in an animators' training, after which she was assisted to form her own junior youth group, which includes 14 participants.

While supporting the daughter in this service, the Bahá'ís encountered her father and shared the vision of the program with him. They explained that the program would help junior youth develop a strong moral structure, discover their talents, and improve their powers of expression, abilities that would build their capacity to contribute positively to the betterment of the world. Moved by this vision, the pastor helped mobilize junior youth by presenting the program to his congregation and encouraging parents to let their youth participate.

The understanding of this pastor and his wife was further enhanced by regular visits by the coordinator of the program. In these visits, the coordinator shared various themes from Ruhi Institute Book 5 with the pastor. His deepened understanding led him to fully support his daughter in carrying out the program, and her junior youth group included two of his other children!

- *Service projects remove barriers and can lead to increased interest in the program*

A pastor in the **Accra-Tema** cluster (**Ghana**), who had been antagonistic toward the program, changed his attitude after he witnessed the junior youth carrying out their service project. When the program was first presented to him, he reacted negatively because of its religious background. But after he observed the youth carrying out their service project and learned that they did this voluntarily, he asked the animator who had initially explained the program to him to reintroduce it. This time he appreciated the value of the program and asked that it be implemented in his church after consultation with the church elders.

The friends in **Lagos** (**Nigeria**) have learned that a successful service project can serve as an avenue for the expansion of junior youth groups and for exposing residents of the community to the Faith. A cleanup project was organized by a junior youth group that was accompanied by its animator and the coordinator of the program in the cluster. Some individuals who were witnessing this activity took interest and came forward to ask about the source and significance of the program. The coordinator presented the program and explained that it was a contribution by the Bahá'í Faith to the transformation of society.

Role of Resource Persons: *Each learning site is served by one or more resource persons. A primary function of the resource persons and the learning sites is to develop the capacity of junior youth coordinators, who benefit from “a process that involves not only their participation in training but also their continued support as they are accompanied in their endeavors by resource people.”*

Spain

The following reflections of the resource person at the learning site in **Madrid** illustrate how a spirit of humility and flexibility creates a relationship of mutual learning and support with coordinators.

Preparation and flexibility. I have made efforts to systematize and plan my visits. I know that sometimes I visited a coordinator without having dedicated enough time to preparing for that visit, and then I felt that much more should have been done in the time I spent there. At the same time, I have realized that, although planning is essential, being flexible also is. For example, in my last visit to the Murcia cluster, I had planned to study some documents, but once there I saw that the coordinator needed to talk about many other things, so I tried to adapt to the situation. Then I realized that it had been much easier to readapt and improvise than when I didn't have an initial plan. So, not only are planning and flexibility both necessary but also a thorough plan allows one to be flexible without losing the objective of the visit.

Joy, confidence, and capacity building. Another reflection has to do with the process of empowerment that every coordinator (and probably everyone else) goes through. I have been thinking a lot about how to help coordinators raise their capacity. It certainly has to do with deepening their understanding of some concepts and developing the ability to reflect on and learn from their experiences, but it also has to do with developing skills in the field of action that help us feel more confident. These measures of progress are evident in the joy they produce in someone who's seeing their own capacity grow. Sharing that joy is also part of accompanying someone in their process of empowerment, and doing so helps the person feel more confident and therefore develops more capacity.

Visiting along with a coordinator. Some of my visits have been in the company of a regional or a national coordinator and that has had several advantages. In this way the unity of vision about what is happening in a cluster is greater. Different perspectives interact with each other to attain a greater portion of the truth. Also, the cluster coordinator then feels that the accompanying being received is sound and coherent. Much more is learned when we can reflect with someone else on a visit. Further, when I was not familiar with a cluster, it was a relief for me to be accompanied by someone else who could introduce me to the people and take me to the communities and key activities.

Relationships with institutions. Being able to consult, reflect, and plan with others has helped me a great deal during the last year, and it is interesting to see how a new structure is emerging. I have been asked by institute boards, coordinators, and others about what their relationship to me should be like. I answered that it is something we'll have to learn, and I think that's what we are doing. Even though I still feel unable to describe the nature of my interactions with the national and regional institutions, I am aware of the importance of those interactions, and I feel that others are, too. It is wonderful to see how open everyone is to learning and serving together.

Building the Capacity for Accompanying Others in Service: *In striving to foster this capacity in coordinators and animators, resource persons do so through exemplifying behavior and qualities that contribute to a culture of teamwork and learning at all levels—being good listeners, nurturing strengths in others, demonstrating loving fellowship, and sharing knowledge in an ongoing conversation with believers involved in the program.*

India

The following account is drawn from a report that describes how a resource person interacts closely with coordinators and supports them.

For the past five months, the resource person who resides in the **Banthra** learning site has been focusing his efforts on this cluster and has found the experience to be a great source of learning. Spending time with coordinators, animators, and junior youth was very fruitful. The coordinators and collaborators made their daily plans, and together with the resource person, they visited the animators. They were quite successful in helping to start devotional meetings in the homes of many junior youth with the help of animators and development facilitators. Every step they are taking now is in a learning mode. They always study the messages together and have become very serious about the service they are offering for the betterment of the world.

The resource person and coordinators are working very closely to form a team of collaborators comprising experienced animators. They are going to work to strengthen the service projects in all the groups and are planning to have training for the coordinators in the next level of the texts.

Cluster coordinators visit all the groups regularly, usually every month, and they visit all the animators every week. They are learning what it means to collaborate and spend a lot of time together. This is contributing greatly to their friendship, which makes consultation very easy. Their animators' reflection gathering has also become a regular occurrence. Recently, they have started to study the messages of the House of Justice and some parts of Book 5 with the animators to enhance their understanding. There are four experienced animators in their team of collaborators. These animators are assisting other animators to go through all the books in the sequence. They have also been trying to monitor the names of the children and junior youth in the Statistical Report Program for the Training Institute (SRP Institute).

The coordinators are gradually building their capacities. For instance, one coordinator would always need assistance to organize an animators' gathering and to visit them, but now he is able to do these things on his own. Another coordinator has also become very serious regarding his service and is carrying out such activities by himself. They still need support, however, for identifying potential animators from the wider society.

Malaysia

Junior youth coordinators participating in the seminar at the **Subang Jaya** learning site shared that the process of raising collaborators or assistants to help with the work of the cluster is not one that is isolated or separated from the process of accompanying. It does not happen magically; rather the process unfolds as a coordinator works closely with the animators.

It was also discussed that to expand the pool of animators who are able to assist with some task of coordination, one needs to be with them every step of the way. It is important to observe how an animator carries out his/her many responsibilities, such as facilitating the text, visiting parents, and initiating conversations about service projects. This helps coordinators understand how they should work with a particular animator to continually raise his or her capacity. Moreover, a coordinator is able to recognize the strengths of each animator in the process of intimately accompanying him or her in service. As they closely support the animators, coordinators need to develop an ability to see the strengths of others and how to build on those.

Building the Capacity for Planning: *Seminars at learning sites help coordinators enhance their planning skills, which are of great assistance when collaborating with institute coordinators and other agencies at the cluster level to formulate plans for cycles of activity.*

Samoa

The resource person associated with the learning site in **Upolu**, Samoa, reported how apparent it is that the ideas and plans discussed in the periodic seminars for coordinators are gradually being implemented when they return to their clusters. She comments: “We can see how even if this takes more than six months, perhaps a year or longer, we are laying the groundwork and creating the awareness of the elements that need to be in place.” Her account follows of how the seminars assisted coordinators to strengthen their planning skills.

During the planning section of the seminar, we looked at our goals and the lines of action that we need to take to achieve them. The coordinators then broke these up into weekly, monthly, and cycle goals and actions. We made tentative schedules for when we return, recognizing that they were likely to be adjusted after consultations with the cluster agencies and animators. The coordinators shared that they always ask themselves—“Are we working in a humble posture of learning?” Many of the participants planned, reflected, reviewed, and modified their plans many times over as more elements and strategies were considered. The atmosphere was intense and focused as we reflected on the progress made.

I had purchased for each coordinator a simple diary, which has proved to be a great tool for the coordinators to use for their planning and reflection. It has a 12-month calendar at the front where they can write their plans, and each day has space to reflect and record activities. The coordinators from Tongatapu have been using this tool for the past year and it was simple but very effective. As a group we came up with a list of things to include in our plans based on our consultations.

- Set goals for the next six months
- Review each group: strengths, needs, and what aspect the coordinator will be accompanying them with (this will lead to what lines of action to take)
- Accompanying and monitoring progress of groups: progress through the texts, service projects, complementary and meaningful activities, visiting parents, and raising capacity of animators
- Working with groups of animators; assist new animators in forming groups and visit first few meetings
- Training in junior youth texts, keeping two books ahead of the groups

- Collaborating with institutions: cluster agencies, especially institute coordinators, and Local Spiritual Assemblies
- Reflection and reporting

Role of Seminars in Fostering Learning: *Learning sites generally offer training seminars three or four times a year. These are devoted to study, field visits, and planning, and are central to generating learning about the program. The seminars are then complemented with follow-up visits and support to the coordinators from the resource person in their network so that there exists a healthy rhythm of training and accompanying.*

Ireland

An account from the resource person at the **Stan Wrouth** learning site in Ireland describes how a recent seminar for junior youth coordinators combined deep reflection and field experience, both essential elements of strengthening the quality of the program.

To encourage reflection at the seminars, a form was designed that would assist coordinators to reflect with each animator on aspects of their group before coming to the seminar. These included questions such as how each group was formed and sustained, the relationships between the animator and the junior youth, how the junior youth were advancing through the material, the nature of the acts of service the groups were carrying out, and how the participants were changing. Study and analysis of these experiences enabled coordinators to identify areas of the program that needed to be strengthened. Further, it was helpful in allowing “growth” to become less mysterious. Coordinators were better able to articulate where and why growth was happening.

The field visits during the seminars included experiences useful to enhancing the functioning of coordinators. For example, they were invited to work alongside animators in the neighborhoods and gain more insight into their experience. There was also an opportunity to study some of the newer junior youth texts, such as “The Human Temple,” which influenced the coordinators’ contributions in consultation in a profound way. They gained a deeper appreciation for how the materials treat concepts critical to the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. Additionally, they realized that the materials are a sequence of courses which empower junior youth and are not merely a collection of books, of which groups might study one or two over the course of three years. Most of the field visits also provided a chance for coordinators to experience serving with youth from the wider community who are advancing through the main sequence of courses.

Kenya

At the Matunda Soy learning site in Kenya, seminars have helped to enhance the ability of coordinators to identify and train animators, plan, and hold animator gatherings.

After the two weeks of animator training, all the coordinators and potential coordinators returned to the learning site. They first reviewed the program for the last two weeks of their stay. After this, they shared their experiences and insights from the field, specifically about the process of identifying animators for training. It was clear that the coordinators had learned *how to reach youth from the wider community*, what the content of their conversation with the youth and their parents should be, how to accompany animators in

forming groups, how to effectively facilitate the junior youth texts, and how the practices should be carried out. The coordinators also learned that the effectiveness of the training is based on early planning and regular conversation about the program with the inhabitants. In reviewing Book 5, they learned that the purpose of the first few meetings with the animator and the junior youth is to enable them to understand the different aspects of the program that contribute to sustaining groups.

From the start of the training, the coordinators were learning all the elements of the program, and this assisted them during the *planning session*, which began from the first day the friends arrived at the learning site. It was impressive to observe how the coordinators were reflecting deeply on the nature of their clusters and going back to their reflection notebooks for more insights that guided their planning. The plans also benefited from the experience in their clusters in the past cycles and from insights gained during the seminar. It was good to note how important it was to talk about planning from the very beginning of the seminar so that the participants could think about their clusters as they were learning. This process helped coordinators create realistic plans. There was time for the coordinators to share them in plenary, which helped them learn from the other participants and refine their plans. We encouraged them to share their plans with the institutions and agencies in their cluster to enlist their support.

One aspect of the program that was given attention in the Matunda Soy cluster itself was the *gatherings for animators*. The invitation of the animators was usually done through formal letters, visiting some in their homes, and with the aid of local institutions. Coordinators discussed various ways of inviting animators. It was noted that in some clusters, the participation during an animators' gathering is not especially encouraging. This offered an opportunity for learning. It was suggested that coordinators share with animators the content of the gathering in advance and request some to present their experiences in specific aspects of the program. This also proved to be one way of encouraging animators to attend.

Before attending the animator gatherings that were organized in Matunda Soy, the coordinators reflected on how such gatherings were organized in their own clusters, and this was another opportunity for them to learn from one another. The *reflection meeting* in Matunda included newly trained animators, Auxiliary Board members, existing animators, and all cluster coordinators. Selections from Book 5 were reviewed and the progress, challenges, and experience of the past three months were discussed. The creativity of the coordinators resulted in a lot of discussion, which inspired the animators to share their experiences openly, and this led to good learning and planning. After reflection in the different villages, all animators and coordinators visited groups in those communities. Some groups were studying and others were having their service projects. After this, all the coordinators came together to consult on how the animator gathering went, some of the insights gained, and suggestions for improving these meetings even more.

